

WEATHER  
RAINFALL  
CALIFORNIA  
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# Rain or shine, Californians defy state's fickle climate

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By Timothy Egan  
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SACRAMENTO — Near the end of 1849, the year that tattooed a gilded image of California on the consciousness of a young America, it started to rain in the boom town built around the gold mines here.

This storm, riding the moisture-larded currents of the jet stream, was no gentle mist; it was what old Yankee farmers call "a gully-washer." It washed much of infant Sacramento away, forcing people to get around by canoe. They called it the Great Inundation.

Great it may have been, but like the storms of this month, it was not unusual. In 1862, a fourth of California's taxable wealth was destroyed by a flood that turned the vast Central Valley — one-fifth of the entire state — into an inland sea, nearly 400 miles long.

## Climate with two speeds

"The thing about California that people always fail to remember is that our climate has only two speeds: off and fast-forward," said Marc Reisner, a Bay Area author and expert on water policy. "We sit around for six months of the year while it never rains, and then in the winter, these terrible storms come in."

The floods of this month, compared to at least a dozen similar episodes in the last 150 years, are somewhat mild: they caused about \$300 million in damage, washed out hundreds of homes and killed 11 people.

But coming after a string of recent natural disasters, the floods of 1995 left many Californians looking to the sky and wondering what they had done to bring such a curse upon themselves.

In fact, weather records indicate that California, between periods of Mediterranean balm and geologic calm, has always been a dangerous place to live. But the state long ago established itself, first through railroad and real estate promoters, and later through Hollywood, as a place where Life's a Beach.

So, many people here are still surprised to see headlines like the one that ran the other day in The San Francisco Chronicle: "California Sunshine More Myth Than Reality."

The sun does shine for more

than 240 days a year in Southern California, as those in its glow are quick to point out, making it possible to grow oranges and winter roses, and to run from one Rose Bowl party to another without a coat.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, this state has "better days and more of them than any other in the country."

But a case can be made that nature in the Golden State is more lethal than that of any state outside the Southern edge of the hurricane belt.

It's common knowledge that Southern California is a severely fractured piece of ground, with hundreds of small, active earthquake faults running through it. Less well known is the fact that most of Los Angeles is built on a flood plain that still does not drain very well, even though most of the storm water runs into the concrete gutter of the Los Angeles River.

Sacramento, one of the fastest growing cities in California, also sits in the midst of a huge flood zone.

Engineering miracles have allowed California to defy nature and overcome its principal handicap, a dearth of water, as well as hold back the main rivers when they are engorged. But much of what nature has thrown at the state in recent years has made a mockery of human alteration.

## \$32 billion in damage since '89

Since 1989, earthquakes, fires, floods and windstorms have caused more than \$32 billion in damage to California.

Three years ago, people in Santa Barbara were spray-painting their lawns green to get around the cosmetic problems of a six-year drought. But this month, it rained more in eight days in Santa Barbara than it usually does in an entire year.

Few cities of any size have such records on their books. But in California, a year's worth of rain in a few weeks is not unusual.

In 1986, an 11-day storm dumped 49 inches of rain in areas north of Sacramento. The floods of that year killed 13 people, injured 96, destroyed 13,000 homes and businesses and forced 50,000 to evacuate.

Before that it was the 1955

floods, which killed 61 people, and before that it was the 1928 deluge, which took 400 lives in Southern California. And so on.

Wildfires are common throughout most of the arid West, but they seem to be most deadly when fueled by kiln-dry winds of the desert and aimed at steep-sloped subdivisions in California.

Those fires are often followed by winter storms, which in recent years have washed away entire hillsides.

In the Pacific Northwest, precipitation is twice as great on average than in most of California. But the rain seldom kills anyone in Washington and Oregon. (Suicide from dreary skies is another matter.)

To be fair, more people died from heavy snowstorms — usually from heart attacks — in the East last year than were killed by California's 1994 disasters. People all around Los Angeles made this point repeatedly, even as mud was coursing through Malibu.

## Weather key to economy

Californians have a huge investment in promoting their weather. Tourism and agriculture, two of the state's leading industries, are dependent in their own ways on consumer visions of a golden orb setting behind palm-fringed beaches.

Kevin Starr, the California historian, has pointed out that this image was mass-distributed starting in the 1880s, when the Union Pacific Railroad advertised California as a place of easy living, and continued on the pictures of every box of fruit.

More than 100 years ago, the Southern Pacific railroad hired a New York newspaper editor, Charles Nordhoff, whose report, "California for Health, Pleasure and Residence" helped to fix the identity.

The report made much of the 15 or so inches of rain which falls on average in Los Angeles — about a third of what New York can get in an average year.

But it did not mention one observation of the first Spanish settlers in California, in the 1770s. They recorded warm days and tolerable nights.

But they were astonished when it started raining one winter month, so much so that it washed away their adobe huts. Of course, they rebuilt — with thicker mud.